



MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service, 1909-1949, by Keith Jeffery (Bloomsbury, £12.99)

The oldest continuously surviving foreign intelligence-gathering service, MI6 was founded in 1909 as the foreign section of the new Secret Service Bureau in response to the “spy fever” stirred up by sensationalist (and untrue) press reports about German agents infiltrating Britain. It proved its worth during the second world war when it supervised the deciphering operations at Bletchley Park. This is the first time a historian from outside the service has been allowed access to the top secret archives. The result is authoritative and as compelling as any spy novel - indeed, more so for it details the astonishing bravery of real people, from factory workers to aristocrats, many of whom are still only known by a codename (Jeffery was forbidden from disclosing the names of any agents not already known). The dangers were all too real. Jeffery tells how a Soviet agent tried to defect in 1945, promising to unmask British double-agents. Unfortunately, Kim Philby was given the case and the man disappeared. It was “as if he had pulled the trigger himself”. **PDS**